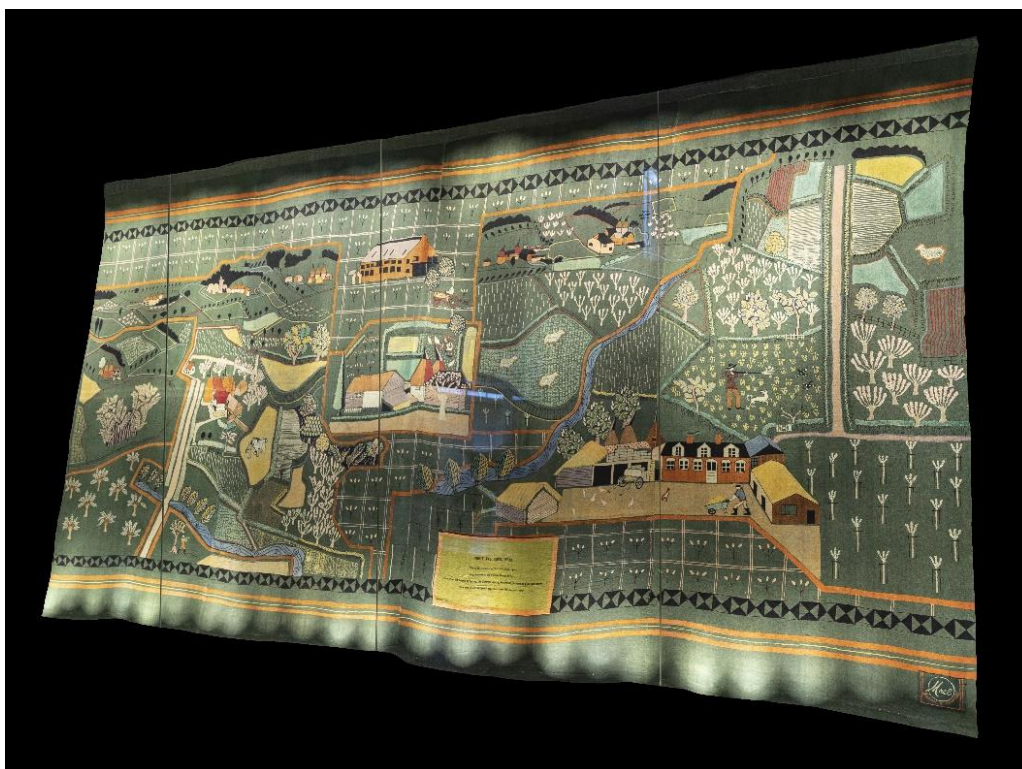


41. Huge Wall-Hangings

This response features Senior Professor Leslie Witz, University of the Western Cape, in discussion with Dr Ollie Douglas, Curator of MERL Collections. We join them as they find out more about unexpected links between these extraordinary and iconic Festival of Britain artworks and a major, mid-century, South African exposition known as the Van Riebeeck Festival, which Professor Witz has labelled 'Apartheid's Festival'.

Michael O'Connell, Diversity of British Farming Wall-Hangings, 1951



Kent panel from O'Connell's Diversity of British Farming, as displayed at The MERL, 2016–2021 (MERL 63/18/9).

Ollie Douglas (OD) – Documents held at The MERL recently revealed that these extraordinary and massive wall-hangings were amongst materials sent on loan by the UK to South Africa in early 1952. The timing of their shipping tallies with the construction of the Van Riebeeck Festival in Cape Town in April of that year. This event was similar in scale to the Festival of Britain. Can you describe what the Van Riebeeck Festival was like and what it was intended to communicate? Who was Van Riebeeck? What was the political context of this mid-century display?

Leslie Witz (LW) – Jan van Riebeeck was the commander of the revictualling station set up by the Dutch East India Company en route to the East Indies in the mid-seventeenth century at the Cape of Good Hope. Although this was not a position Van Riebeeck ideally wanted—he had been found

guilty of corrupt trading practices—and was constantly on the lookout for promotion to the Company's headquarters in Batavia, over the following three hundred years he became inscribed as the founder of a country called South Africa.

This was no more so than from the mid-twentieth century when the National Party came to power with an election promise to implement a policy of legally enforced racial segregation called apartheid. Even though they had won a general election their hold on power was incredibly tenuous. They did not have an overall numerical majority amongst the electorate who in terms of the laws at the time were mostly racially defined as white. Moreover, the social and political movements associated with black urbanisation during and since the Second World War threatened white supremacy in South Africa.

One of the arguments amongst historians is that apartheid was carried out precisely to secure white privilege and power. In these circumstances the coincidence of the tercentenary of Van Riebeeck's arrival in 1952 provided the opportunity to construct a national history of whiteness that was defined through a moment identified as the origins of settlement. Such a history was to be devoid of conflict amongst settlers, despite the fact that the South African (Anglo-Boer) War had taken just 50 years before. It was to deliberately avoid race and to make South African history appear as exclusively white using the alibi of settlers.



Re-enacting Van Riebeeck's arrival, 1952 (National Library of South Africa, Cape Division; Photo: *Cape Times*).

This history took the form of massive government-sponsored festival throughout the country with its central stage in Cape Town during the last weeks of March and early April 1952. A massive Festival

stadium was built on Cape Town's foreshore which had been reclaimed from the sea, float processions depicting a history of settlement and contemporary South Africa paraded through the city's streets, and for three weeks a vast Festival fair was opened to the public, attracting almost a million visitors.

The Festival fair included human showcases of indigenous southern African people, constructions of idyllic European villages as signs of settler origins, and representations of various industries—most notably gold and diamonds—as signs of national progress. Van Riebeeck was accorded special prominence, and in special pageant his arrival was fabricated into a singular moment, scripted, and then re-enacted on the shores of Granger Bay in early April 1952. As I say to my students, Van Riebeeck did not land in 1652, but 1952.



Introductory text describing the UK landscapes in O'Connell's *Diversity of British Farming* (MERL 63/18/1).

OD – The creators of the Festival of Britain—where the wall-hangings were displayed in 1951—skirted around colonial histories, describing an increasingly multicultural UK population as an ‘island race’. Although theirs was a Festival intended largely for a white audience, people of colour certainly visited and Black musicians from Caribbean contexts performed. Who was expected to visit Van Riebeeck's Festival? How and why was the event subject to boycotts? In terms of pre-Festival movements, what forms of political resistance in South Africa did these protests build on? And, in terms of later-twentieth-century history, what did the boycotts of 1952 push towards?

LW – Much like the Festival of Britain the intended audience of the various components of the Van Riebeeck Festival were white, which under apartheid's Population Registration Act of 1950 was a legally designated racial category. Those who did not fall within this category were named as ‘coloured’ or ‘native’ and were encouraged to attend separate pageants and performances on separately set aside days for groups with these fixed racial designations.

But attendance and participation in these events was extremely low. This was largely due to, as you indicate, a very successful boycott campaign that was largely organised by affiliates of a broad coalition known as the Non-European Unity Movement. Not only did they call the Festival ‘an orgy of *herrenvolkism*’ in its celebration of white supremacy, but that it was depicting merely a set of lies and fabrications about South African history. For those affiliated with the Unity Movement, the boycott of the Van Riebeeck Festival was important in its ongoing campaigns that advocated a principle of total non-collaboration with the structures of colonialism and apartheid, such as the Coloured Affairs Department and the Native Representative Councils.



Anti-Festival protest, 30 March 1952. On stage (L-R) are Phyllis Ntantala Jordan, Willem van Schoor, S. A. Jayiya, Goolam Gool, Dan Neethling, and Jane Gool (Halima Gool, courtesy of Allison Drew; Photo: Ralph Taylor).

The African National Congress (ANC)—which was at the time of Festival beginning to lead a sustained campaign to defy the laws of apartheid—joined this boycott but did not give it as much prominence. For the ANC non-collaboration and boycott was much more of a strategic political position which could be employed as and when the need and circumstances arose. At time of the Festival the ANC was more concerned with building itself into a grassroots, broad based, mass movement which, later on, would confront the apartheid regime.

OD – Although we know the wall-hangings were sent as part of a wider loan in 1952, we do not know yet whether they made it into the final displays. What seems certain is that there were at least two (and possibly more) locations in the Festival site where they might have been relevant. The first of these was the main UK pavilion, a collaboration between F. H. K. Henrion and Hugh Casson. This

would have been one of the first projects Casson embarked on after serving as Director of Architecture at the Festival of Britain (his enthusiasm for the project may have been informed by the fact that his wife, Margaret, was herself born in Pretoria!). What can you tell us about the themes of the UK's contribution? Why was a UK pavilion important in establishing a unifying foundation story for apartheid South Africa?

LW – As far as the UK's specific contribution the organisers of the Van Riebeeck Festival conceptualised England and Scotland, along with the Netherlands and France, as one of the components, or as they termed it the founder nations, of the racially exclusive white South African nation. Folkdances that were intended to represent essentialised cultural characteristics of these named founder nations, were performed in the Festival stadium.

As for the UK, more broadly the guidebook to the festival fair advertised the UK pavilion as showing images of 'the great British contributions' to Van Riebeeck's nation. In this pavilion, formally presented by the British government, notions of democracy and technology were presented as the distinct national achievements. In a story of national progress one exhibition was of a series of technical inventions and another depicted a history of parliamentary democracy that had been transported in full from the Festival of Britain.



UK pavilion exhibit on the 'Birth of the House of Commons' taken from the Festival of Britain to Cape Town.

Together these exhibitions were not only presented as the necessary signs of progress and advancement, but their trajectory was, according to the Van Riebeeck Festival organisers, precisely the direction that (white) South Africa was following. The Festival fair organisers pushed this further by asserting that the nation's parliamentary system was based on the British model. This was in spite of the fact that the vast majority of South Africans were disenfranchised by virtue of their racial classification.

OD – The other possible site of relevance for a series of wall-hangings showing rural landscapes of the UK was a major set-piece display of an English village called *Much-Binding-in-the-Marsh*. Here the immersive experience of modern village life in England was presumably intended as a comment on South Africa and the development of its own communities and countryside. What would visiting this display have been like? Why did it sit in such a central location, and how did it form a key role in articulating the mid-century apartheid narrative of South Africa?

LW – *Much-Binding-in-the Marsh* was not an official UK pavilion at the Van Riebeeck Festival fair. It was sponsored by South African businesses and took on a much more fanciful aura. The village was named after an English radio farce set on a former Royal Air Force base turned country club, which originally ran on the BBC between 1947 and 1953. This was rebroadcast in South Africa in the early-1950s.



Festival visitors experience the stocks at the fictional English village, *Much-Binding-in-the Marsh*.

At the Van Riebeeck Festival fair, the name of *Much-Binding* was turned into a new form as an invocation of what the organisers called a 'typical hamlet' of 'the Southern Counties of England.' The village was an eclectic, mythological stereotype of Englishness. It had reconstructions of a 'Norman' church, 'Tudor-style' buildings, a supposed typical pub named as the 'The Lion', a Dickensian 'Old Curiosity Shop' and a village Green. There were reenactors on site who were supposed to represent 'proper British people.'

The most popular part of the village, presenting an ideal photo opportunity, was the replica of a set of stocks. This was all quite a comic and sanitised version of an idyllic English rural past. But *Much-Binding* had more to do with demonstrating a ruralised folk heritage of Englishness as a constituent part of the South African nation. It was also used as a comparison with the so-called 'native village,' which stood opposite to it on the fair grounds. In this juxtaposition *Much-Binding* was presented as a much more stable, careful construction, of so-called civilisation of the (white) South African nation,

while the buildings in the ‘*native village*’ opposite were conceived of as having a much more rudimentary, crude nature, indicative of backwardness and primitiveness.

OD – Can you say a little bit more about ‘*native villages*’ and ‘*native performances*’ at the Van Riebeeck Festival? Human zoo style exhibits were common in later-nineteenth century world fairs but had become increasingly unacceptable by this stage in the twentieth century. How did the organisers seek to justify their inclusion? What role did they play in this 1952 Festival? How did the contrast of European-style rural living and these racialised reconstructions of indigenous ways of life contribute towards wider white supremacist or progressionist overtones of the Festival?

LW – It seems strange from the context of mid-twentieth century South Africa to raise the question of the performances in the native villages in the way you have done. South Africa was such a rigidly, racially stratified society, and apartheid was in the process of being legally implemented in all spheres of life. Of course, the processes of colonisation, settlement, land dispossession and laws of segregation over three centuries had set the foundations well before that.



Photograph by Bryan Heseltine showing a woman constructing a Zulu-style ‘beehive’ hut, most likely as part of the ‘Bantu Pavilion’ (Pitt Rivers Museum 2012.85.26).

Bringing in displays and performances of people at what was called the ‘*bantu pavilion*’ or, in the instance of the South-West Africa pavilion, a group of ‘*bushmen*,’ was in accord with these policies and

their histories. The power of representation in their appearance and their performance lay in their appearing as seemingly naturalised. There were some concerns and objections raised, particularly from newspapers associated with the ANC and the Unity Movement, but the mainstream press largely commented in descriptive terms of engagement, appearance, and performance with the emphasis on a state of primitive otherness.

But your question is so important because it highlights how in making these performances into the seemingly mundane, a most powerful form of racial superiority was being enacted not only for those who visited the Festival fair, but for those who read about in newspapers, watched it in film newsreels, and listened on the radio.



Detail of a windmill, taken from 'The Fens' panel from O'Connell's *Diversity of British Farming* (MERL 63/18/8).

OD – Within the wider Festival, were there any other contexts in which a largescale series of artworks depicting agricultural change might have been relevant? If so, what were they like? In their original context of display on London's Southbank site in 1951, the wall-hangings helped contribute towards a wider visual reimagining of the history of the British land and its peoples. Was land also a core theme of Van Riebeeck's Festival and, if so, was this about justifying colonial land grab and land rights, about agricultural development and change, or a celebration of the natural environment?

LW – Your question has set me thinking in interesting directions I had not pursued before. In fact, I went back to the material I have gathered on the Van Riebeeck Festival and what is noticeable is how it was that different forms of industry that were emphasised as the sign of settler progress and accomplishment.

There is actually very little on agriculture at all, apart from the marketing of products at the Festival fair, displays of farming machinery, and exhibitions by regional co-operatives, which assisted white farmers in their operations. In the history presented through the pageantry, in promotional material, and associated Festival publications Van Riebeeck himself is presented as the pioneer of farming through the revictualling station and the granting of plots of land to farmers who had previously been employees of the Dutch East India Company. Associatedly, the movement of frontier settler farmers in the nineteenth century outside of the ambit of British control and the conquest of the interior was further inscribed into the odyssey of struggle, triumph, and progress known as the great trek.



Original coach house, Kleinplasie Living Open Air Museum, Worcester (Roché Petersen, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons).

In effect this story of agriculture was one, as you correctly point out, that justified conquest and dispossession. Africa was depicted as dark and uncivilised prior to the arrival of the settlers as farmers who in this tale told through the Festival, journeyed to the interior as the bearers of light. This forms a central component of what has been called the apartheid's founding myth of the empty, unproductive land prior to the arrival of settlers. Of interest is that the agricultural living museum, Kleinplasie (small farm), which opened outside the town of Worcester in the Cape in 1981 initially

was developed along this narrative path, celebrating the frontier farmer as the self-sufficient pioneer and Van Riebeeck as *Die Grondlegger* (The Founder).

OD – If we find confirmation that the wall-hangings definitely did form part of the Van Riebeeck Festival displays what are the implications of this for the ways in which The MERL should interpret and understand these items today? Can we reimagine these artworks in ways that might help promote a more inclusive or shared history, and in ways that help contribute towards a more equitable and decolonial future?

LW – I think the first point of departure would be to find where exactly these wall-hangings were displayed. Were they part of the UK pavilion? Were they part of *Much-Binding-in-the-Marsh*? Or were they displayed elsewhere, such as in the various art exhibitions that took place in the Cape Town at the time? Their display may have been part of the overall exhibitionary context of apartheid and settler nationalism, which I have referred to previously. Perhaps then, this is something that that The MERL needs to acknowledge and this discussion and its incorporation into your 51 Voices online exhibition is indeed part of doing just that.



Historical Exhibition of Arts: The Castle, Cape Town (Van Riebeeck Festival Arts Committee: Cape Town, 1952).

What is provided is entangled and difficult histories where it is not just the aesthetic of the object, or its depictions, or its present situation in the Museum, but how through its movements and journeys it became part of (and indeed embroiled in) different histories. Those movements are as much part of the wall-hangings as their provenance, making, and the visual stories they depict. This allows for the

sort of museum work where history and objects are constantly being re-formed through different sets of communicative encounters.

When I was first approached about these wall-hangings in the Museum and the possible association with the Van Riebeeck Festival I was both astonished and excited. What an amazing conjuncture I thought. Let me find out more. Always keeping such unexpected association at the forefront is the way to constantly open space for more and varied interpretations of pasts.



Inverted statue of Jan van Riebeeck constructed for the exhibition Y350?, as displayed at University of the Western Cape, as part of *Memorials Beyond Apartheid*, September 2004 (Photo: Leslie Witz).

Further Information (online):

For more about the wall-hangings and related artworks – [MERL 63/18/1-9, 96/117, 2009/64/1-7](#)

For more about Senior Professor Leslie Witz see – <https://www.uwc.ac.za/study/all-areas-of-study/departments/department-of-history/people>

For more details of Bryan Heseltine's 1952 photographs see – [People Apart: Cape Town Survey 1952](#)

For more details of Worcester Museum (Kleinplasia Living Open Air Museum) –
<http://worcestermuseum.org.za/main/>

Further Reading (online and offline):

Michael Jonas, Kleinplasia Living Open Air Museum: A Biography of a Site and the Processes of History-Making 1974–1994 (MA History thesis; University of the Western Cape, 2012)
(<http://etd.uwc.ac.za/xmlui/handle/11394/4046>)

Ciraj Rasool and Leslie Witz, 'The 1952 Jan Van Riebeeck Tercentenary Festival: Constructing and Contesting Public National History in South Africa' in *The Journal of African History*, 34: 3 (1993), pp.447–468 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/183102>)

Leslie Witz, *Museum Times: Changing Histories in South Africa* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2022) [esp. chapter 6]

Leslie Witz, *Apartheid's Festival: Contesting South Africa's National Pasts* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003)

Witz, Leslie. 'From Langa Market Hall and Rhodes' Estate to the Grand Parade and the Grand Parade and the Foreshore: Contesting Van Riebeeck's Cape Town' in *Kronos*, 25 (1998) pp.187–206,
(<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41056433>)